

# UTC News & Views

*UTC News & Views is a consumer publication of the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission.*

## Railroad tracks mean danger!

Impatience is proving to be a deadly trait for people crossing railroad tracks. It has become such a problem that the UTC railroad safety program is preparing two new safety commercials targeting those who are dying to cross railroad tracks before they should.

In recent months, there have been three accidents near Safeco Field in Seattle. People crossed the tracks immediately after a train passed, and were struck by another train on a second set of tracks. Two were seriously injured and one was killed. A similar accident at a different Seattle crossing critically injured a pedestrian.

The new commercials will run as public service announcements, and educate viewers on the importance of waiting until the signal lights have stopped flashing. Trains do not operate like car traffic. Trains can go on any tracks, in any direction, at any time. UTC track safety investigators have found some pedestrians trespassing on the railroad right-of-way actually believe if they walk on the left tracks, they will see the train approach—just like they would see an on-coming car, if they were walking on a road. You should never walk or linger on train tracks. Trains travel so fast that you may not hear them until it is too late.

Another form of impatience which is causing fatal results is when a train blocks a crossing. Recently, in the Columbia River Gorge near Bingen, UTC track safety investigators found farm workers were climbing through stopped trains to get to work. Trains were

stopped on passing tracks waiting for other trains to pass. It was only by luck and quick response by UTC staff that no one was injured at this site. Upon discovering the situation, UTC staff advised train crews of the situation so they can reduce the amount of blocking that occurs. Staff also posted Spanish and English danger signs at the crossing within two days of learning about the problem.

To learn more about rail safety, please contact Bob Boston at 1-800-562-6150 or 360-664-1264.



## Technology provides choices for phone service.

There's an exciting new form of phone service available, which is becoming increasingly popular with the arrival of broadband (high-speed Internet) service. It's called VoIP, which stands for voice over internet protocol. VoIP breaks sound into small packets, then ships them over the Internet or a private network to another phone user.

There are two types of VoIP services available today. One is computer-to-computer, which requires special software for your computer, along with a microphone and headset. The other is computer-to-phone, which uses a conversion device attached to your computer and allows you to use a regular telephone. Both types of VoIP require a high-speed broadband connection.

The computer-to-computer model allows for calls anywhere in the world between computers that have the same software, as long as both parties are online at the same time. The computer-to-phone model allows for calls between VoIP users and anyone with a telephone.

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VoIP can provide low-cost calling, however, there are some considerations that consumers should be aware of before they purchase a VoIP plan.

Enhanced Emergency calls to 911 may not work. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has mandated all computer-to-phone companies must provide traditional service, yet there may be differences in how those calls are handled. VoIP might not provide addresses and call back information, which 911 call centers rely on to send emergency responders. This can become a problem as you can take your VoIP set-up on the road. If you shop for VoIP service, ask how enhanced 911 information is provided and how address records will be updated.

VoIP service may not work during a power failure, unless a backup power system is established. Traditional phone service will normally work during a power failure, if you use a hard-line telephone (not cordless).

Some companies have their own networks and can provide relatively reliable service. Others use the Internet and may have problems delivering high quality voice service, particularly at times when the Internet is busy. It's not always possible to tell whether a company uses the Internet or a private network by their advertising. If you're considering using VoIP, before making a decision, ask how the service is provided.

You should be able to keep your existing telephone number if you convert to a VoIP provider. However, you should verify the process with a prospective provider before making a switch.

For more information regarding VoIP services, visit the FCC web site at [www.fcc.gov/voip](http://www.fcc.gov/voip) or

## **Moving, The UTC is looking out for you!**

### **Why should you get a written estimate for your move?**

One customer who did not have a good experience called a moving company and asked for a written estimate. Unfortunately, the company told the customer it was not necessary. The customer trusted the company and accepted the verbal estimate in the amount of \$1,223.78. To the customer's surprise, when the move was completed, the company handed the customer a bill for \$2,093.76. The customer could not believe what was happening. So, why should you get a written estimate? A written estimate is binding. The company can only charge a certain amount above the initial written estimate, unless it writes a supplemental estimate for the extra charges.



### **Do customers have any rights and responsibilities?**

One customer began by calling several companies for estimates to move their household goods. A carrier was chosen and the customer's goods were moved. After the carrier finished the move, it gave the customer a "Rights and Responsibilities Guide". Later that evening, the customer started reading the guide. The customer learned there was a state agency that regulates moving companies. The company should have given the brochure to the customer before the move was performed. The next day, the customer called the UTC and asked staff if the company used was authorized to do moves within the State of Washington. The company did have a permit to do business in the State of Washington but should have given the customer the "Rights and Responsibilities Guide" before the move took place. If the customer moves again, the first call will be to the UTC.

In the past year the commission issued penalties against Temp Store Moving Company for \$3,000; Neighbors Moving for \$42,475; Jordan River Moving and Storage for \$22,800; and All My Sons Moving and Storage for \$69,900.

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Most regulated moving companies do a good job. However, there are some companies that do not follow the rules and take advantage of customers at a particularly vulnerable time in their lives.

What does staff look for when it investigates a moving company? The same things you should look for when choosing a moving company:

- **Is the company registered with the UTC?**  
To find out call 1-800-562-6150, or go online at [www.wutc.wa.gov/mover](http://www.wutc.wa.gov/mover)
- **Does the company have complaints filed against it?**  
To find out, call the UTC's Consumer Affairs Section at 1-800-562-6150, or visit the web at [www.wutc.wa.gov/consumer/stats](http://www.wutc.wa.gov/consumer/stats) and click on complaints by company.
- **Does the company provide written estimates?**  
A customer should always get a written estimate before their move. Verbal estimates are illegal!
- **Does the company give customers a copy of the UTC's "Rights and Responsibilities Guide"?**  
The Rights and Responsibilities Guide is a brochure that explains what customers need to know before, during, and after a move. Make sure you get one. And be sure to read it. Copies are available at [www.wutc.wa.gov/consumer/publication](http://www.wutc.wa.gov/consumer/publication) and click on Moving Company Rights and Responsibilities.
- **Does the company explain all aspects of the move to the customer?**  
Make sure you understand everything about your move and everything about any form you sign, before you sign it. If you don't understand something, ask questions. If you don't understand the answer, try another company.

For more information about hiring a moving company, visit the commission's web site at [www.wutc.wa.gov/mover](http://www.wutc.wa.gov/mover)

## **COMMISSIONER'S CORNER**

### **Overview of Federal Telecommunications Legislation**



*Commissioner Phil Jones*

On June 28, 2006, the [Senate Commerce Committee](#)

voted 15-7 to send a broad telecommunications bill – S. 2686, the Advanced Telecommunications and

Opportunity Reform Act – to the full Senate for a vote. A slimmed-down version of that bill (HR 5252) passed the House of Representatives by a 321-101 vote on June 9, 2006.

A key provision of the bill would grant companies such as AT&T and Verizon a federal franchise to provide television services. This would allow them to compete with cable companies, without first negotiating individual franchise agreements with every city they would serve.

The bill would also stabilize the universal service fund (USF). The USF adds a fee to traditional telephone bills and distributes those monies to make telephone service available at a reduced cost in rural areas.

A third provision would prevent states from helping consumers with wireless telephone complaints. All complaints would have to go through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) or the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The FCC and FTC are both in Washington, D.C. This provision would limit the ability of our state to protect and help wireless consumers.

### ***Network Neutrality***

One area of contention for the legislation is network neutrality. This practice refers to regulation that would prevent providers such as Verizon and Qwest from blocking access to some Web sites, charging more to access one Web site than another, or providing faster access to one Web site than another. Some proponents of network neutrality would expand its definition to place broad nondiscrimination requirements on broadband providers.

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An amendment to include network neutrality provisions in the bill failed on an 11-11 vote. A similar amendment undoubtedly would be offered before the full Senate.

### ***The Future of the Bill***

Upon the commerce committee's passage of the bill, Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon placed a "hold" on legislation until network neutrality language is included. A hold means the bill needs at least 60 votes to limit debate and allow consideration by the full Senate.

Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska introduced a bill on May 1. It was modified three times before the final markup which included more than 213 proposed amendments. Because Sen. Stevens reports that he does not yet have 60 votes, the ultimate outcome of the Senate bill is very uncertain.

If you would like to contact your House or Senate congressional representatives about this legislation, visit UTC's website and click on Access Washington. The link is <http://www.access.wa.gov/government/index.aspx>

### **Download recordings of UTC meetings from the web**

Over the years, the UTC has made it easier for consumers to participate and listen to public meetings, without being in attendance, through the use of conference call lines and the Internet. Now, you can also download recordings of these meetings and listen to them at your convenience at a later date.

These .mp3 audio files or "podcasts" can be downloaded to your computer and opened with a media player such as iTunes, Windows Media Player, or RealPlayer.



For more information about podcasts, and recordings of UTC meetings, visit our

web site at <http://www.wutc.wa.gov/webimage.nsf/0/01313C4E7957FE0E8825719A00806D6D>

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